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SUBJECT: MGLE01: BAABDA PALACE WHISPERS

REF: 05 BEIRUT 3642

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
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SUMMARY

1. (S) Seeing Egypt as a natural ally in its resistance to U.S. promotion of democracy in the region, President Lahoud plans to travel to Sharm El-Sheikh this month to "sit in the lap" of President Mubarak, as one of Lahoud's aides candidly put it. In the meantime, various allies of the Syrian regime in Lebanon appear to have been "reactivated," and are connecting with Lahoud's Presidential Palace as well as with the SARG. End summary.

LAHOUD TO SHARM EL-SHEIKH

2. (S) Over coffee at a discreet location far from the Presidential Palace in Baabda, Ghassan Ezzeddine, a military aide to President Lahoud, told DATT and emboff that Lahoud will travel to Sharm El-Sheikh in Egypt May 19-22. The ostensible purpose of the trip is a meeting with Egyptian President Mubarak, according to Ezzaddine.

OUT BY THE POOL... AND IN MUBARAK'S LAP?

3. (S) Ezzeddine said that Lahoud has concluded that his current "Syrian-Iranian cover" is not sufficient to allow him to enjoy the full length of his extended (thanks to the SARG) term in office. He therefore intends to reach out to the Egyptians and also the Saudis, seeing them as waging a rear-guard battle against U.S. efforts to promote democratic change in the region, even while they maintain good relations with Washington. This, in Lahoud's view, makes the Egyptians and Saudis his natural allies. He hopes to gain political cover from them by "sitting in their lap," said Ezzeddine.

4. (S) It will not be all work and no play in Sharm El-Sheikh, according to Ezzeddine. In fact, it looks as if it will not even be mostly work. Lahoud, who has put Ezzeddine in charge of making arrangements, had been careful to instruct him to find a hotel with an Olympic-size swimming pool. Ezzeddine said he did not expect the workdays in Sharm to be very rigorous, and was planning to bring his swimming

trunks.

MICHEL SAMAHA AT WORK

15. (S) Separately, Mazen Hayek, a Lebanese businessman and close friend of Lahoud's press secretary, Rafiq Shalala, has relayed some other accounts of goings-on in the Palace. According to Shalala, Michel Samaha -- former Information Minister and onetime eager would-be intermediary between the USG and the SARG -- has lately been pressing Lahoud to receive the likes of Palestinian rejectionists Ismail Haniya, Osama Hamdan, and Khaled Mishaal at the Palace. Samaha was acting on behalf of the SARG. Hayek's comment: "This is how our 'brothers' still manage to interfere in Leb internal affairs and continue to play a 'beyond frontiers' role on the Palestinian scene...."

16. (S) Without mentioning Hayek's/Shalala's account, we asked Ezzeddine about Samaha's visibility in the Palace these days. Ezzeddine did not have any details, but grimaced and described Samaha as an opportunistic, social-climbing, and somewhat unsavory character.

WHILE OTHER SYRIAN ALLIES ARE "REACTIVATED"

17. (S) Ezzeddine said that there were obvious signs of the SARG's allies in Lebanon being "reactivated," Samaha not the least of them. Another prominent example was that of Abou Kifaa', younger brother of Hassan Moussawi, the Biqa'a Valley-based founder of the "Islamic Amal," which broke off from Amal following Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Abou Kifaa' is so well connected with the SARG that he can secure a meeting with President Asad whenever he wants, Ezzeddine claimed.

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... IN LEBANON AND ELSEWHERE

18. (S) One another Palace-related note, Hayek, who is based in Dubai, told us that Ralph Lahoud (son of President Lahoud), together with the brother of Mustafa Hamdan (the former Presidential Guard commander now jailed on suspicion of involvement in the assassination of former Prime Minister Hariri), has visited Dubai recently to "liaise" with former Palace military aide Wassef Serhan.

19. (S) Note: Serhan, like Ezzeddine, was a Lebanese military officer assigned to President Lahoud's staff at the Palace. (Ezzeddine despised him.) He resigned from military service in November 2005 after his personal finances attracted the attention of the UN International Independent Investigative Commission, as well as of the news media (reftel). Not long afterward, Serhan -- who was close to Hamdan -- moved to Dubai to go into business with prosperous expatriate Lebanese relatives. End note.

FELTMAN